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Incipient tonogenesis in Phnom Penh Khmer: Computational studies

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Abstract







In the colloquial Phnom Penh dialect of Khmer (Cambodian), lexical use of F_0 is emerging together with an intermediate VOT category and breathy phonation following the loss of /r/ in onsets (e.g. [ʔ] /kru:/ ‘teacher’ > [kʰù:]). I show how this incipient tonogenesis might arise in a series of computational simulations tracing the evolution of multivariate phonetic category distributions in a population of ideal observers. Acoustic production data from a fieldwork study conducted in Phnom Penh was used as the starting point for the simulations. After establishing that the basic framework predicted relative stability over time, two possible responses to a phonetic production bias were considered: one in which agents correctly identified the source of (and thereby compensated for) the effects of the bias, and one in which agents misattributed the acoustic effects of the bias as a property of the onset. Good qualitative fits to the empirical production data were found for the latter group of learners, while the outcome for compensating learners resembled production data from a related dialect. These results are consistent with the sudden and discontinuous nature of many sound changes, and suggest that what appear to be enhancement effects may also emerge under different assumptions about the number of cue dimensions accessible to or deemed relevant by the learner.

1 Introduction

A topic of central interest for researchers studying the evolution of sound systems is PHONOLOGIZATION (Hyman, 1976), the historical process whereby the distribution of a predictable and phonetically natural process becomes phonologically determined. A familiar example is the idea that lexical tone contrasts can trace their origins to the pitch perturbations conditioned by differences in obstruent voicing (Matisoff,

1973; Hombert et al., 1979). A schematized account of this process is sketched in Table 1. First, intrinsic differences in vowel F_0 (Stage I) become a perceptual cue to the identity of the initial consonant (Stage II). If other cues to the contrast between initial consonants are lost, the contrast may be maintained solely by differences in F_0 (Stage III), setting the stage for a reanalysis of pitch as a contrastive phonological feature. Similar accounts have been sketched for the development of contrastive vowel length (Kavitskaya, 2002), vowel quality (Moreton and Thomas, 2007), nasalization (Beddor, 2009) and consonant voicing (Johnsen, 2011).

Table 1: Tonogenesis as phonologization F_0 (after Hyman, 1976). Sparklines show time course of F_0 production.

Stage I		Stage II		Stage III	
pá		pá		pá	
bá		bă		pă	

Phonologization often involves multiple phonetic features. An example is provided by the case of incipient tonogenesis in Phnom Penh Khmer, an Austroasiatic language of Cambodia. As shown in Table 2, Standard Khmer contrasts plain with aspirated stops in onsets; it also allows a large number of onset clusters, of which one in particular, /Cr/, will be of interest here. It has long been noted that in the colloquial speech of the capital Phnom Penh (hereafter PP), words such as គ្រូ /kru:/ ‘teacher’, realized as [kru:] in Standard Khmer, are produced in PP as something like [kù:], [k^hǔ:], or [kɯ:]: that is, realized with a falling or falling-rising pitch contour along with increased post-release aspiration and/or breathy phonation in place of the trill (Noss, 1966; Huffman, 1967; Wayland and Guion, 2005; Filippi and Vicheth, 2009). Thus the contrast between colloquial forms of words such as គ្រូ /kru:/ ‘teacher’ and ក្រូ /ku:/ ‘pair’, or តា /ta:/ ‘grandfather’ and ត្រា /tra:/ ‘seal, stamp’, is presumably being maintained primarily by differences in the phonetic realization of the nucleus.

Table 2: Plain, aspirated, and plain stop+trill onset clusters in Standard Khmer.

ប៉ា	/pa:/	‘father’	ផា	/p ^h a:/	‘cloth’	ប្រា	/pra:/	‘kind of fish’
តា	/ta:/	‘grandfather’	ថា	/t ^h a:/	‘to say’	ត្រា	/tra:/	‘seal, stamp’
កូ	/ku:/	‘pair’	យូ	/k ^h u:/	‘old’	ក្រូ	/kru:/	‘teacher’

In an acoustic investigation of this sound change, Wayland and Guion (2002, 2005) found that /r/-loss in PP Khmer was characterized by the development of increased post-release aspiration along with a falling-rising pitch contour in two speakers. More recently, I explored the perception and production of this contrast in 20 native speaking participants of PP Khmer (Kirby under review). Figure 1 plots F_0 (in Hz) over the time course of the vowel for male and female speakers’ productions of /CrV/ forms in both reading (Standard Khmer) and colloquial (PP) conditions. For speakers of both sexes, F_0 of words produced in the colloquial condition was consistently lower (by 20-30 Hz) than F_0 of words produced in the standard/reading condition at all timepoints; however, the steepness of the F_0 drop was not significantly greater in /CrV/ onsets compared to /CV/ or /C^hV/ onsets. Items were also examined for evidence of a phonation type distinction by measuring the amplitude differential between the first and second harmonics (H1-H2) and the difference between the amplitude of the first harmonic and the amplitude of the most prominent harmonic of the third formant (H1-A3), both corrected for the influence of vowel height using the method of Iseli and Alwan (2004). The results indicate that both H1*-H2* and H1*-A3* are generally higher in colloquial speech than in standard speech; however for both measures this difference is primarily manifested at onset and offset of the vowel (Figure 2).

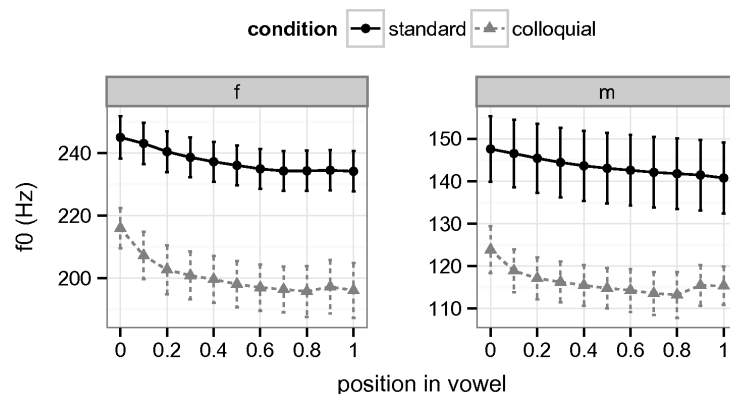


Figure 1: Average F_0 (in Hz) by sex (left: female, right: male) and condition for /CrV/ items. Bars show standard error of the mean. After Kirby (under review).

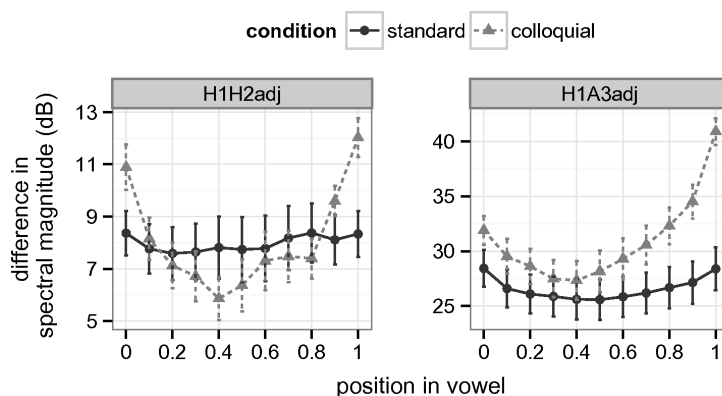


Figure 2: Average H1*–H2* (left) and H1*–A3* (right) by condition (standard: solid, colloquial: dashed) for /CrV/ items. Bars show standard error of the mean. After Kirby (under review).

As they only analyzed forms with underlying trills, Wayland and Guion assumed that the degree of aspiration in colloquial forms was comparable to that of fully aspirated stops. However, data from Kirby (under review) shows that the duration of post-release aspiration in colloquial PP /CrV/ forms is intermediate between that of standard /CV/ and /C^hV/ forms. Figure 3 shows VOT values for /CrV/ in colloquial PP speech in comparison with standard Khmer /CrV/, /CV/ and /C^hV/ items.¹ Although VOT of

¹ Note that there are no significant differences between reading (Standard Khmer) and colloquial (PP Khmer) pronunciations of /CV/ and /C^hV/ forms for any of the acoustic variables studied. As such, these forms will be conflated in the remainder of the manuscript.

colloquial /CrV/ forms is indeed increased relative to the reading pronunciation of those same forms, it is not as extensive as in reading condition /C^hV/ forms. A multilevel regression model estimates the VOT of aspirated stops in reading condition to be, on average, nearly twice as long as the VOT of plain stops in /CrV/ sequences when produced colloquially. Thus it appears that, rather than merging with one of the existing categories, the loss of /r/ in PP has triggered the emergence of a novel phonetic (if not yet phonological) category.

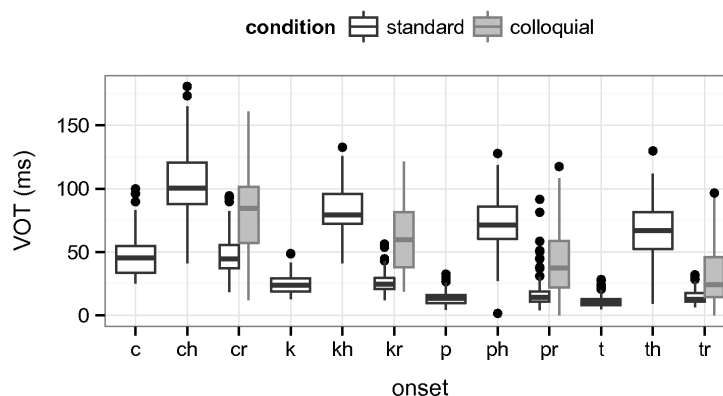


Figure 3: VOT by onset in standard (open) and colloquial /CrV/ forms (shaded). From Kirby (under review).

To explore perceptual sensitivity to cues distinguishing colloquial PP forms like [kʰr̥u:] ‘teacher’ from [kʰu:] ‘pair’, Kirby (under review) employed a two-alternative forced choice (2AFC) listening paradigm to test listener sensitivity to three potential cues distinguishing standard from colloquial pronunciations: F_0 , VOT, and breathy voice quality. The perception tests employed synthesized stimuli of quasi-continuously varying F_0 and categorically varying differences in VOT and breathiness. The results indicate that F_0 has become a sufficient cue distinguishing colloquial /CrV/ forms from /CV/ forms, but that increased aspiration and breathy voice quality may also be used by listeners as cues to this contrast.

These findings confirm that, to the extent that colloquial PP realizations like [kʰr̥u:] can be assumed to be the end result of a historical process of change starting from Standard Khmer forms like /kru:/, the contrast appears to have transphonologized: in this case, the loss of the trill has been compensated for by

the enhancement or emergence of other acoustic cues.² While superficially similar to the process sketched in Table 1, it is not immediately clear what phonetic precursor may have conditioned this particular change, since all of the onsets in the affected series (/pr- tr- cr- kr-/) are voiceless. In Kirby (under review), I suggest an account of this incipient tonogenesis grounded in the tendency in standard/read speech for /r/ to fortite, either devoicing or becoming a fricative or fricativized glide. An example of such a production is shown in Figure 4. These fricativized or devoiced /r/s can condition breathy voice quality at nucleus onset, which would in turn result in a lower F_0 on account of reduced vocal fold tension. The increase in VOT could then result from listeners misparsing the resulting frication noise as a property of the onset consonant (cf. Beddor, 2009).

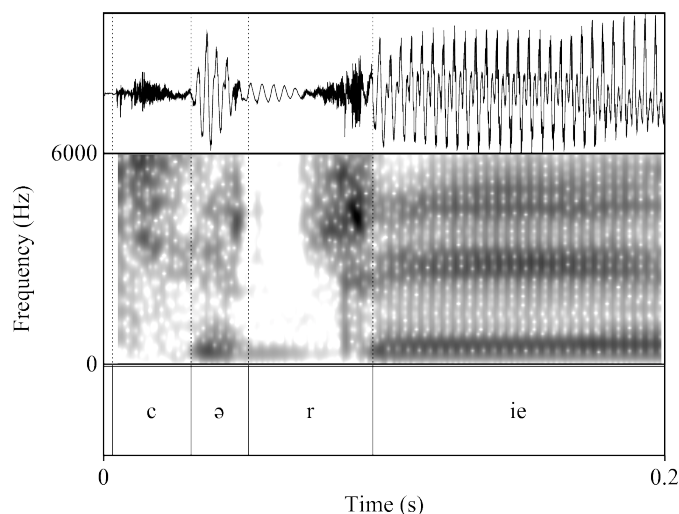


Figure 4: Example of a fricativized trill in the initial portion of a reading production of the form ព្រង់ /cɾiɛŋ/ ‘to sing’. Labels are underlying (quasi-phonemic) transcriptions.

This type of account, on which sound change is suggested to be the result of gradual accumulation of articulatory phonetic bias and listener error, is susceptible to at least two types of criticism. First, such an account predicts a more or less linear relationship between the degree of /r/-loss, VOT, breathy voice, and F_0 lowering over time. This prediction runs counter to the well-established sigmoidal progression often observed in sound changes involving consonantal contrasts, whereby changes between generations are often discontinuous and abrupt (Labov, 1994, 2001). Although no apparent-time study of the PP Khmer

² Note that many (though not all) Khmer speakers in Phnom Penh control both standard and colloquial varieties, i.e., this is a state of relatively stable variation for some speakers. However, since the /r/-ful realizations of /CrV/ forms are clearly historically conservative, I take approach the task here as to model the emergence of the novel (colloquial) form from the conservative variety.

case has yet been conducted, there is no evidence, anecdotal or otherwise, to suggest that differences in the realization of e.g. the form of [kru:] /kru:/ ‘teacher’ in Standard Khmer (where /kru:/ > [kru:]) and colloquial PP Khmer (where /kru:/ > [k^hu:]) are anything but categorical.

Second, this account fails to explain why F_0 , and not phonation type or VOT, has become the primary perceptual cue to the contrast in PP Khmer. Indeed, the process by which Khmer is thought to have acquired its sizeable inventory of diphthongs and two contrasting consonantal registers almost certainly involved a stage of contrastive voice quality (Henderson, 1952; Ferlus, 1992), and several scholars have proposed that the canonical path to tone is similarly mediated by phonation type contrasts (Pulleyblank, 1978; Diffloth, 1989; Thurgood, 2002). This hypothesis is complicated by the existence of languages or dialect clusters that show evidence for a range of different outcomes of a cue restructuring process. A good example is that of Kammu dialects, which provide evidence for a number of possible evolutionary outcomes (Svantesson and House, 2006; Abramson et al., 2007). As shown in Table 3, while the conservative Eastern dialects retained a voicing contrast in initial consonants, this contrast transphonologized differently in each of the three Western dialects. The result is a dialect continuum suggesting several evolutionary trajectories, or stopping points along a single trajectory.

Table 3: Evolution of initial obstruent voicing in Kammu (after Premsrirat, 2001).

<i>E. Kammu</i>	<i>W. Kammu</i> (tone 1)	<i>W. Kammu</i> (tone 2)	<i>W. Kammu</i> (register)	<i>gloss</i>
bu:c	pù:c	p ^h ù:c	puc	‘rice wine’
pu:c	pû:c	p ^h û:c	puc	‘to take off clothes’
gla:ŋ	klà:ŋ	k ^h là:ŋ	klà:ŋ	‘stone’
kla:ŋ	klâ:ŋ	k ^h lâ:ŋ	klâ:ŋ	‘eagle’

In the case of tone and voice quality, it is also not clear why languages would necessarily have to ‘pass through’ a stage of contrastive voice quality, rather than simply employing both cues simultaneously. Indeed, the frequency with which phonologization of one cue seems to entail the dephonologization of another is actually unexpected from a perceptual point of view, since considerable redundancy is the typical state of a phonetic contrast (Lisker, 1978). If phonologization is the end result of an enhancement of subphonemic cues, what conditions this enhancement, and what governs the selection of one phonetic dimension for enhancement and not another?

In this paper, I pursue an account of phonologization that is based around the conception of the learner as an IDEAL OBSERVER (Green and Swets, 1966; Geisler and Diehl, 2002; Clayards, 2008; Kirby, 2013a). On this account, the catalyst of subphonemic reorganization is a loss of contrast precision at the level of sublexical categorization, driven by a sufficiently actuated phonetic bias. Shifts in the magnitude of the cue realizations are then predicted to result from the application of an optimal or near-optimal categorization strategy. On this approach it is straightforward to represent the multivariate richness of the acoustic signal and to reason about the categorization behavior of learners under different scenarios using empirical production data of the sort just reviewed. In what follows, I outline the fundamentals of this approach, and then illustrate its application to the case of incipient tonogenesis in PP Khmer.

2 Modeling phonetic category acquisition

The basic problem of speech perception finds a useful metaphor in the ‘noisy channel’ familiar from information theory (Shannon and Weaver, 1949). At one end of the channel is the speaker, who is attempting to send a message to the listener at the other end. However, even under relatively ideal conditions, speech communication is fraught with difficulties, and a number of factors – including, but by no means limited to, the influence of physiological, social, and cognitive constraints on speech production and perception – can introduce variability into the acoustic realization, potentially obscuring the speaker’s intended message. Here, such influences will collectively be referred to as BIAS FACTORS. Setting aside for the moment questions about the source, nature, and influence of these bias factors (but see Garrett and Johnson, 2013), it is enough to simply note that many different types of bias can have a similar effect: namely, they introduce additional asymmetric variability into the speech signal.

To make this a bit more concrete, we may conceive of the speaker’s goal as being to transmit to the listener a sequence of labels, representing phonetic categories, each one signaled along multiple acoustic-phonetic dimensions. The listener’s task is to recover the speaker’s intended sequence of labels based on the acoustic-phonetic information they receive. All else being equal, the speaker’s success is to some extent dependent on the PRECISION of the contrasts being transmitted – precision being determined based on the statistical distribution of acoustic-phonetic cues to the contrast in question. Precision may be reduced for a variety of reasons, including channel noise introduced by bias factors, or changes in the system of contrast at the structural level, which may result in an increase or decrease in the number of categories competing over some acoustic-phonetic space.

This formulation allows us to address the question of how learners might respond *in general* to variation in the degree of contrast precision, abstracting away from the precise causes of such variation. The basic premise of the model of category acquisition outlined here is that learners attempt to parse this

potentially noisy speech input in an optimal fashion. This requires that we make explicit the mechanism by which learners (re)construct category structure on the basis of multivariate acoustic input.

2.1 Representational scheme for phonetic categories

If the speech signal is inherently multidimensional, then any representational scheme for sublexical categories must be capable of handling multiple dimensions. One formal representation meeting this description is a FINITE MIXTURE MODEL (McLachlan and Peel, 2000; Rosseel, 2002), which models a statistical distribution as a weighted sum of other distributions. Mixture models have a long history in speech research and have been used in work on speech perception (Lisker and Abramson, 1970; Nearey and Hogan, 1986; Pierrehumbert, 2001; Clayards, 2008), the perceptual integration of acoustic cues (McMurray et al., 2009; Toscano and McMurray, 2010), and the unsupervised induction of phonetic category structure (de Boer and Kuhl, 2003; Vallabha et al., 2007; Kirby, 2011).

For computational simplicity, and in line with much previous work, we assume that the underlying probability distributions of the mixture components (i.e., the cue dimensions) are normal (Gaussian); however, there is nothing in the following that relies crucially on this assumption, so other distributions (log-normal, gamma, etc.) could be substituted if it is determined they are more appropriate for some of the particular cues investigated here. In a GAUSSIAN MIXTURE MODEL (GMM), a D -dimensional observation vector $\mathbf{x} = (x_1, \dots, x_D)$ is assumed to be independently generated by an underlying distribution with a probability density function

$$f(\mathbf{x}; \Theta) = \sum_{k=1}^K \pi_k \mathcal{N}(\mathbf{x} | \boldsymbol{\mu}_k, \boldsymbol{\Sigma}_k) \quad (1)$$

where $\Theta = (\theta_1, \dots, \theta_K) = ((\pi_1, \boldsymbol{\mu}_1, \boldsymbol{\Sigma}_1), \dots, (\pi_K, \boldsymbol{\mu}_K, \boldsymbol{\Sigma}_K))$ is a $K(D+2)$ -parameter structure containing the component weights π_k , mean vectors $\boldsymbol{\mu}_k$, and covariance matrices $\boldsymbol{\Sigma}_k$ of the D -dimensional Gaussian densities

$$\mathcal{N}(\mathbf{x} | \boldsymbol{\mu}_k, \boldsymbol{\Sigma}_k) = \frac{1}{(2\pi)^{D/2} |\boldsymbol{\Sigma}_k|^{1/2}} \exp \left\{ -\frac{1}{2} (\mathbf{x} - \boldsymbol{\mu}_k)^T \boldsymbol{\Sigma}_k^{-1} (\mathbf{x} - \boldsymbol{\mu}_k) \right\} \quad (2)$$

Note that the component weights π_1, \dots, π_K must sum to 1.

To make this more concrete, we may think of \mathbf{x} as a set of cue values representing an instance of phonetic category c ; of D as representing the number of cue dimensions (x_1, x_2, \dots, x_D) relevant to the perception of that category; and of K as representing the total number of category labels (c_1, c_2, \dots, c_K)

competing over the region of phonetic space defined by D . For example, for a language with three initial stops ($K=3$) cued along four dimensions ($D=4$), we might have $c_1 = /b/$, $c_2 = /p/$, $c_3 = /p^h/$ and $x_1 = \text{VOT}$, $x_2 = \text{amplitude of release burst}$, $x_3 = F_0$, and $x_4 = \text{spectral tilt}$. A given utterance \mathbf{x} will thus consist of four columns, each one providing a value for one of these cues.

2.1.1 Production: sampling

A great conceptual and practical advantage of representing sublexical categories with GMMs is that a single representation can serve as the basis for production as well as perception, thus providing a formal link between production data and categorization behavior (Nearey and Hogan, 1986; Solé, 2003). This allows a learner's experience to form the basis for both the production of instances of a category as well as for determining the category label of novel instances. Formally, production is modeled by taking a point estimate from the approximate cumulative distribution function of the multivariate density as given in Equation 2. Because the cue distributions are continuous, the true probability of any *given* value of x is in fact 0. However, we can define the probability of x falling into some interval of the cue space $[a,b]$ as

$$P[a \leq X \leq b] = \int_a^b f(x)dx \quad (3)$$

for some arbitrarily small difference between a and b . In practice, the selection of a particular value may be achieved by methods such as inversion sampling (where the cumulative distribution function is equated to that of a pseudo random number generator) or rejection sampling (see Devroye, 1986 for details).

2.1.2 Perception: the ideal observer

The GMM for a given category c defines a probability density function $f(\mathbf{x}|c)$; as illustrated above, sampling from this density may be used as a coarse approximation of the output of speech production. The task of the listener can be modeled as the inverse problem: determining the likelihood of a given category label c given an observation vector \mathbf{x} . If we consider the task of a listener to be choosing the speaker's most likely intended message given a set of cue values, and under certain assumptions about the information in the speech signal available to the listener, we can construct a model of the behavior that would optimize this task. This is sometimes referred to as an IDEAL OBSERVER model, a type of Bayesian classifier. Ideal observer models have been used to successfully model perception in a variety of domains and contexts including visual discrimination (Geisler, 1989), reading (Norris, 2006), word segmentation (Goldwater et al., 2009) and auditory word recognition (Clayards et al., 2008).

In order to assign a category label c to an utterance \mathbf{x} , the ideal observer requires access to two sources of information: $p(c)$ (the prior probability of the category c) and $p(\mathbf{x}|c)$ (the probability of the observation, given that it is a member of category c). If we assume these probabilities can be estimated from the statistical distributions of speech cues (Maye et al., 2002; Clayards et al., 2008), the probability that the speaker intended an instance of category c_i given a particular vector of cue values \mathbf{x} is given by Bayes rule as

$$p(c_i | \mathbf{x}) = \frac{p(\mathbf{x} | c_i)p(c_i)}{\sum_{k=1}^K p(\mathbf{x} | c_k)p(c_k)} \quad (4)$$

The optimal classifier is then one in which classification accuracy is maximized. Formally, this means that a given observation vector \mathbf{x} is assigned to a category c_i in such a way that $p(c_i | \mathbf{x})$ is maximized. Assuming that the *a priori* probabilities of the category indices and the class-conditional likelihoods $p(\mathbf{x} | c_k)$ for $k=[1, \dots, K]$ are known (or can be estimated from the data), and that each dimension attribute is independent of every other, the posterior probability of each category index can be computed as:

$$P(c_i | \mathbf{x} = x_1, \dots, x_D) = \frac{p(x_1 | c_i)p(x_2 | c_i), \dots, p(x_D | c_i)p(c_i)}{\sum_{k=1}^K p(x_1 | c_k)p(x_2 | c_k), \dots, p(x_D | c_k)p(c_k)} \quad (5)$$

A deterministic classification rule assigns \mathbf{x} the category label \hat{c}_k with the highest maximum *a posteriori* probability:

$$\hat{c}_k = \arg \max_{k=[1, \dots, K]} [p(c_k | x_1, \dots, x_D)p(c_k)] \quad (6)$$

This classifier is sometimes called a BAYES OPTIMAL CLASSIFIER (Duda et al., 2000). The error rate of this classifier may be expressed as

$$\epsilon = 1 - \sum_{k=1}^K \int p(\mathbf{x} | c_k)p(c_k)d\mathbf{x} \quad (7)$$

Although optimal classifiers make strong assumptions and their predictions are not always in line with human classification behavior (Ashby and Maddox, 1993), they provide a lower bound on the error rate that can be obtained for a given classification problem. Given an ideal observer model of a classification task, one can then degrade the performance in a systematic fashion by introducing known or hypothesized sources of noise, altering the decision process, and/or simulating physiological constraints that could limit performance (Geisler and Diehl, 2002).

3 Simulating sound change: Case studies

Several recent computational treatments of language change (Niyogi and Berwick, 1995, 2009; Baker, 2008a) argue that the sigmoidal or discontinuous nature of change can only be modeled by characterizing the behavior of populations, noting that models where individuals receive input from a single teacher (e.g., S. Kirby et al., 2007) have a linear dynamics that converge to a single stable state from all initial conditions. Most of this work has focused on modeling either lexical or syntactic change, where the task is usually cast as deciding between competing *discrete* representation, e.g. different grammars (Baker, 2008b). A similar approach is often taken in models of the evolution of sound patterns, where the learning problem is cast as one of deciding between discrete pronunciation variants (Niyogi, 2006).

The problem considered here, on the other hand, requires estimation of *continuous* phonetic parameters. Kirby and Sonderegger (2013) provide a simple computational framework for simulating the evolution of a continuous phonetic parameter in a population of learners. Here, I extend that framework in order to consider an additional source of potential discontinuity between teacher and learner: changes in attention to cue. It is well known that speakers often produce impressionistically homophonous categories that can nonetheless be reliably distinguished at the phonetic level (Hewlett, 1988; Labov et al., 1991; Yu, 2007). However, statistical separability along a given acoustic dimension does not guarantee that a learner will attend to that dimension when forming a judgment about category membership (Francis and Nusbaum, 2002). In Kirby (2010, 2011) I demonstrate how, for a fixed set of input data, varying the number of cue dimensions considered by a statistical learner can impact the category structure induced by that learner in a somewhat unpredictable fashion. This suggests that changes in attention to the number of cue dimensions relevant to a contrast could potentially condition abrupt changes in classification behavior across generations of learners.

In this section, I explore this hypothesis using acoustic data from PP Khmer. Rather than a binomial model where a specific variant is either adopted or not adopted, I propose a model that directly represents the multidimensional makeup of phonetic categories, and consider a learning regimen that operates over these representations. By allowing for the possibility that a learner may consider only a subset of the available cue dimensions, substantive and abrupt shifts in the acquired cue distributions become possible.

Returning to the case of PP Khmer discussed in Section 1, there are several empirical findings for which an explanation is desirable. As reviewed above, the loss of /r/ appears to have catalyzed the transphonologization of pitch, aspiration and voice quality in PP Khmer, though to different degrees: F_0 seems to have become the most salient cue to the contrast between /CV/ and (underlyingly) /CrV/ forms, although the distribution of other cues has changed as well. Is it possible for a model to predict this asymmetry without explicitly building it in, for instance in the form of *a priori* constraint weightings?

Similarly, what accounts for the emergence of a phonetically intermediate VOT category in the colloquial production of /CrV/ forms, instead of merging with either the plain or aspirated forms?

To try and answer these questions, we can consider the evolution of a population of ideal observers in a computational setting.³ Assume a population of L learners, each of who receives N training samples from a population of P teachers; furthermore, assume the population is perfectly mixed, such that each training example is equally likely to come from any teacher in population. For the simulations reported here, $L=P=100$ and $N=1000$, but the results do not depend crucially on these parameter values.⁴

At initialization, the population is described by the means and covariance matrices of a D -dimensional multivariate normal mixture with K components. This mixture is used to generate the initial population of P teacher agents, each consisting of an N -length list of D -dimensional exemplars; thus, the state of the population at time t may be described by a list with $N \times P$ rows, which may be subdivided by mixture component (category label) into three matrices $\mathbf{C}_1, \mathbf{C}_2, \mathbf{C}_3$ with $N/K \times P$ rows each. At each iteration, a training sample $\mathbf{X}^T = (\mathbf{x}_1, \dots, \mathbf{x}_N)$ is generated for each learner by sampling at random from these matrices. More precisely, the means and sample covariance matrices of each of the \mathbf{C} matrices are used to independently generate $N/3$ D -dimensional examples of each category using the quasi-randomized Monte Carlo procedure of Genz and Bretz (2009). Each learner then classifies their training sample using the Bayes optimal classifier described in Section 2, applying Equations (5) and (6) to assign each exemplar the maximum *a posteriori* likely category label.

The resulting lists of exemplars and their assigned category labels are then aggregated and used to compute unbiased estimates of the mixture means and covariance matrices, from which samples for the next generation of learners are generated. This requires that learners recover $\Theta = (\theta_1, \dots, \theta_K) = ((\pi_1, \boldsymbol{\mu}_1, \boldsymbol{\Sigma}_1), \dots, (\pi_K, \boldsymbol{\mu}_K, \boldsymbol{\Sigma}_K))$, the parameter structure containing the component weights, mean vectors, and covariance matrices of the GMM from the training sample. Here, Θ is found by maximizing the log-likelihood (8):

$$\log p(\mathbf{x}_1, \mathbf{x}_2, \dots, \mathbf{x}_N | \boldsymbol{\mu}, \boldsymbol{\Sigma}) = \sum_{n=1}^N \log \sum_{k=1}^K \pi_k \mathcal{N}(\mathbf{x}_n | \boldsymbol{\mu}_k, \boldsymbol{\Sigma}_k) \quad (8)$$

Since this cannot be solved in closed form, iterative techniques such as the expectation-maximization (EM) algorithm (Dempster et al., 1977) are often employed, although other methods (such as Gibbs

³ Data and simulation code available at <http://lel.ed.ac.uk/~jkirby/khmer>.

⁴ An important assumption made here is that changes in the phonetic realization of forms are initiated by adult language users, and that these (possibly biased) forms form the input for language learners. This assumption is consistent with findings that phonetic realization of categories can indeed change over the lifetime (Harrington et al., 2000; Harrington, 2006; Sankoff and Blondeau, 2007) but also allows for the fact that children often acquire qualitatively different grammars from those of their parents (Sankoff and Laberge, 1973; Payne, 1976, 1980; Hudson Cam and Newport, 2005; cf. Foulkes and Vihman, in press).

sampling) may also be used (Bishop, 2006). Starting from an initial guess about Θ , the EM algorithm alternates between computing a probability distribution over completions of missing data given the current model (the *E*-step) and then re-estimating the model parameters using these completions (the *M*-step). The *E*-step computes the conditional probability z_{ik} that observation \mathbf{x}_i belongs to the k th component:

$$z_{ik} = \frac{\pi_k \mathcal{N}(\mathbf{x} | \boldsymbol{\mu}_k, \boldsymbol{\Sigma}_k)}{\sum_{j=1}^K \pi_j \mathcal{N}(\mathbf{x} | \boldsymbol{\mu}_j, \boldsymbol{\Sigma}_j)} \quad (9)$$

In the *M*-step, the parameters Θ are then re-estimated based on these conditional probabilities. For more details on EM-based parameter estimation for multivariate Gaussian mixtures, see McLachlan and Peel (2000).

A further assumption made in the present work is that the learner knows the number of category labels in advance. This is a common assumption made in work applying mixture models to the task of phonetic category learning (de Boer and Kuhl, 2003; Lin, 2005), in part because of the difficulty involved with jointly inferring both the number of mixture components and the parameters of those components. The criterion of maximum likelihood in and of itself does little to address the issue, as maximum likelihood may be achieved by associating each observation with its own Gaussian, leading to a model with as many Gaussians as it has data points. This kind of overfitting may potentially be avoided by finding the optimal trade-off between data likelihood and model complexity, a process sometimes termed REGULARIZATION (Hastie et al., 2008). One approach to regularization is to pick the simplest model consistent with the data, where ‘simplest’ is defined with respect to the number of parameters in the model. Kirby (2010) provides an illustration of how the BAYESIAN INFORMATION CRITERION (BIC: Schwarz, 1978) can be used to perform model selection in the induction of phonetic categories, by fitting a number of models with increasing numbers of mixture components K and selecting the model with the smallest BIC. Vallabha et al. (2007) and McMurray et al. (2009) take a ‘winner-takes-all’ approach to the model selection problem: starting from some suitably large K , the mixture parameters are updated after each input, but the component weight is updated only for the most likely component. Feldman et al. (2009) and Dillon et al. (2013) take an explicitly non-parametric Bayesian approach to the problem of phonetic category induction, allowing a potentially infinite number of components K but imposing a prior that is biased toward mixtures with smaller numbers of categories (Rasmussen, 2000; Teh et al., 2006). A comparison of regularization mechanisms for the categorization and density estimation of phonetic categories is left for future work.

To best try and understand the specifics of a particular instance as well as the more general properties governing models of sound change, the simulations reported here use as their starting point the empirical parameter estimates for $D=4$ cues (F_0 , VOT, $H1^*-H2^*$, and duration of /r/) distinguishing the $K=3$ categories /CV/, /C^hV/ and /CrV/ of Standard Khmer, as reported in Kirby (under review). Without loss of generality, we consider here only data from the velar series /k k^h kr/, with F_0 estimates drawn from male talker productions, though this could be generalised to apply across categories by normalizing the cue dimensions. For reference, density estimates of these cues are plotted in Figure 5.

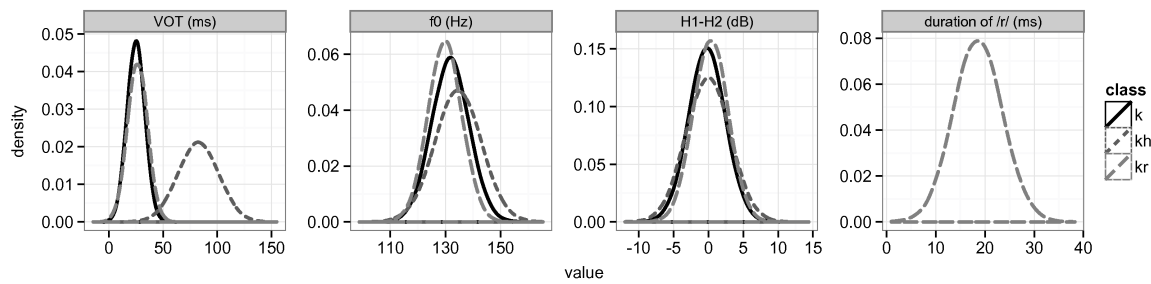


Figure 5: Density estimates for the initial state of $D=4$ cues (VOT, F_0 , $H1^*-H2^*$, and duration of /r/) for $K=3$ phonetic categories /k k^h kr/. Based on data from Kirby (under review).

In the following sections, I report the results of three types of simulations, each seeded from this same initial configuration. The first series establishes the basic stability of this procedure in the absence of perturbing bias (3.1). The second series describes a scenario where a perturbing bias is introduced and learners misparse its acoustic consequences. (Section 3.2). Finally, the third series describes the results of a similar simulation in which listeners compensate for the effects of the bias (Section 3.3).

3.1 Series I: Stability

To establish the basic efficacy of this regime, consider the evolution of these cue distributions over 50 generations in populations of size 100. The lexicon consists of just three items (arbitrarily labeled /ku:/, /k^hu:/ and /kru:/) with equal frequencies, seeded with the data presented in Kirby (under review), given in Figure 5.

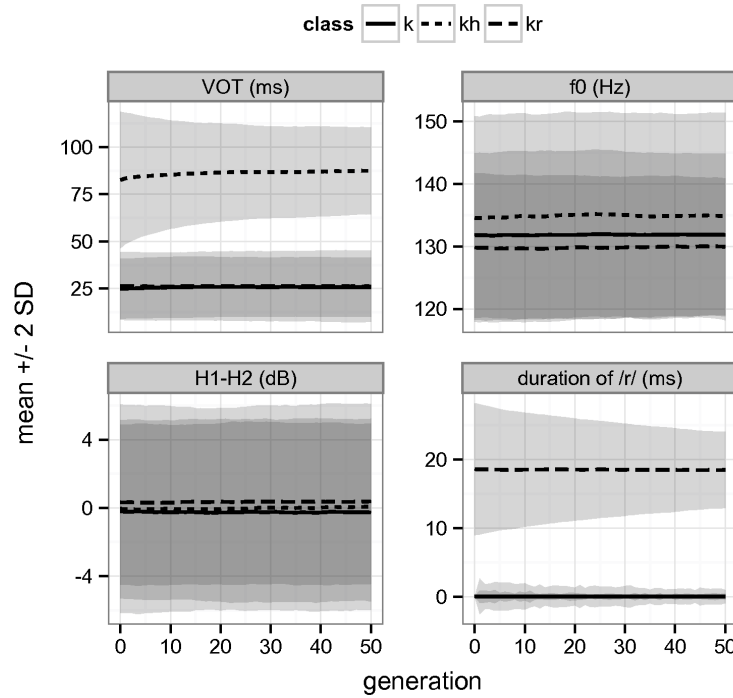


Figure 6: Stability in the evolution of phonetic cue distributions over 50 rounds of sampling and estimation. Classification error rate at generation 0: 0.001; generation 50: 0.002.

Figure 6 shows the evolution of the mean and variance in a representative simulation. Visual inspection suggests no significant changes in the mean between the initial and final distributions; this is corroborated by the results of Hotelling’s two-sample T^2 test, the multivariate analog of the t test ($p < 0.0001$). Error rates are similarly stable over the course of the simulation, never rising above 0.01%. What does change slightly over the course of iterating this sampling/estimation regime is the variance of the mixture components, especially those with well-separated means (VOT of the /k^hu:/ class and duration of /r/ for the /kru:/ class). This is to be expected due to the interaction of the optimizing nature of the learning rule, which seeks to maximize the classification accuracy of the learner, and the finite number of samples drawn from the distribution at each iteration.⁵ This is consistent with the analytic results of Boyd

⁵ Recall that a sample estimator $\hat{\mu}$ of a normally distributed random variable is itself distributed $\mathcal{N}(\mu, \sigma^2 / n)$, converging to μ as $n \rightarrow \infty$; the unbiased estimator of the sample standard deviation $s^2 = \frac{1}{n-1} \sum_{i=1}^n (x_i - \bar{x})^2$ is similarly asymptotically normal, approaching the true standard deviation with large n .

and Richerson (1985), who show how such cases of ‘blending inheritance’ reduce the variance of a quantitative trait over time (Boyd and Richerson 1985: 75; cf. Kirby and Sonderegger, 2013).

The results of Series I suggest that transphonologization of F_0 is unlikely to emerge spontaneously. This is perhaps unsurprising given that, with large training samples and strong parametric assumptions, statistical learners are extremely accurate at estimating the parameters of the distribution which generated their training data. Nonetheless, it is important to establish that the system predicts (relative) stability in the absence of a perturbing bias.

3.2 Series II: Misparsing the acoustic effects of bias

Where this becomes interesting is when we introduce a bias factor impacting the production of /r/. The two main variants observed in the data in Kirby (under review), devoiced taps/trills and (voiced) fricatives, accounted for around 20-25% of all reading condition (i.e., Standard Khmer) productions of /r/. Here, I assume roughly this percentage of tokens are realized in this way. This was implemented by reducing the perceived duration of /r/ in some /CrV/ tokens by a random percentage ρ , which was then added to the VOT of those same tokens (see Figure 7). Over time, this has the effect of reducing the perceived duration of /r/ and increasing the perceived duration of the onset.

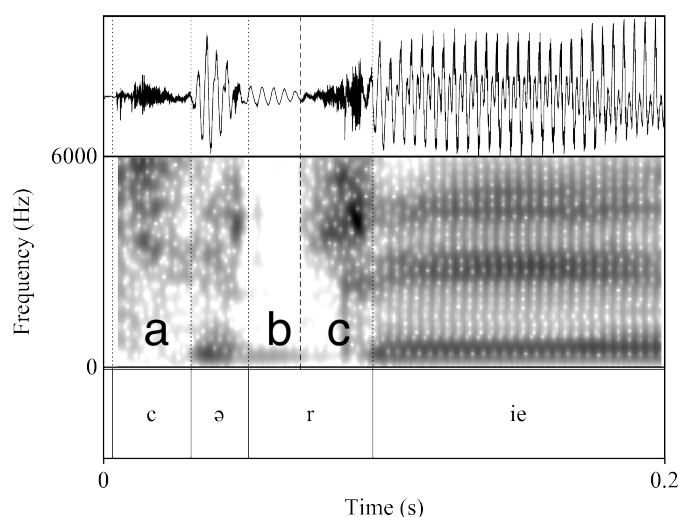


Figure 7: Illustration of how misparsing is implemented in the simulations, using the example of ព្រឺង /crien/ ‘to sing’ from Figure 4. Region (a) is the original onset burst (28 ms); region (c) is the misparsed portion of /r/ (25 ms); and region (b) is the ‘correctly’ parsed portion of /r/ (20 ms). In this example, the onset would be perceived as 53 ms in length, and the /r/ just 20 ms.

Applied continuously, it is clear that this type of bias will eventually result in the duration of /r/ in /CrV/ training examples approaching zero at a rate proportional to the strength of the bias. It stands to reason that at some point, the acoustic presence of the trill will be so degraded in the input that learners will no longer consider this dimension when making category assignments. In the absence of any data on the minimum duration of a perceptible trill, I adopt a somewhat arbitrary, but empirically derived cutoff: when the mean duration of /r/ in the training sample falls below 2 standard deviations away from the mean of the initial sample (i.e., from the empirical reading production data), a learner will no longer regard this cue dimension as relevant for the purposes of categorization. In the present case, this generally meant a cutoff of 4-5 ms. Altering this cutoff point changes the rate at which the qualitative shift in attention to cue takes place, but otherwise does not substantively change the predictions of the model as described below.

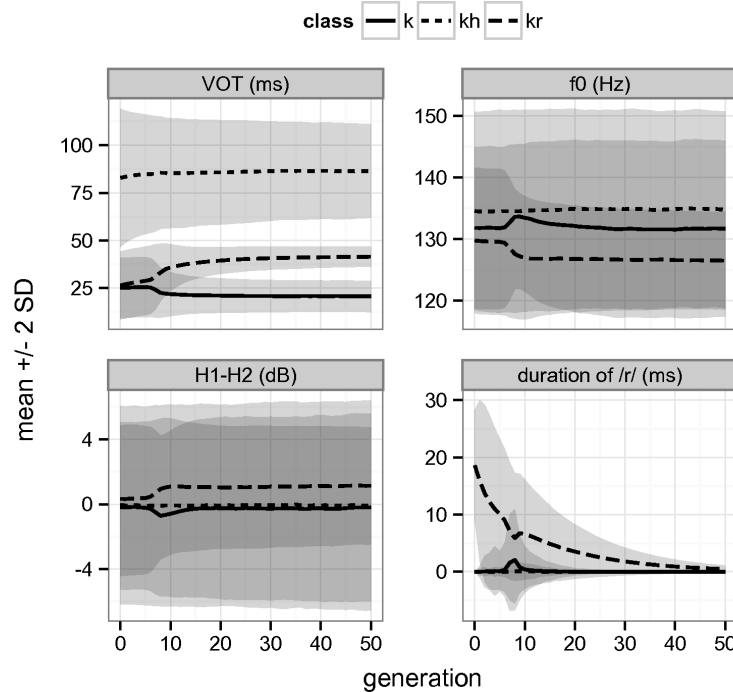


Figure 8: Evolution of means and variance of cues to category distributions after 50 generations in a population that misattributes ρ proportion of 20% of /r/s as increased VOT (see also Table 4). Lines indicate category means; shading shows two standard deviations around the mean. Note the abrupt changes in variance at generation 9, especially for the duration of /r/, which is the point in this simulation run at which this dimension becomes ignored by the learner.

Table 4: Evolution of means and standard deviations of F_0 , VOT, H1*-H2*, and duration of /r/ at $t = 1, 5, 10, 20$, and 50 generations in a population that misparses ρ proportion of 20% of /r/s as increased VOT. ‘emp’ = empirical results from Kirby (under review).

	t	VOT (ms)	F_0 (Hz)	H1*-H2* (dB)	duration of /r/ (ms)
/CV/	1	25 (8.1)	132 (6.7)	-0.20 (2.6)	-
	5	25 (8.0)	132 (6.7)	-0.23 (2.6)	-
	10	22 (5.9)	133 (6.1)	-0.59 (2.6)	-
	20	22 (4.6)	133 (7.1)	-0.25 (2.9)	-
	50	21 (4.2)	132 (7.3)	-0.19 (2.9)	-
	emp	25 (8.0)	132 (6.7)	-0.20 (2.6)	-
/C ^h V/	1	83 (18.5)	135 (8.2)	-0.06 (3.1)	-
	5	85 (16.0)	135 (8.4)	-0.11 (3.1)	-
	10	85 (14.7)	135 (8.4)	-0.08 (3.2)	-
	20	86 (14.0)	135 (8.3)	-0.08 (3.3)	-
	50	83 (12.6)	135 (8.3)	-0.07 (3.3)	-
	emp	83 (18.3)	135 (8.2)	-0.09 (3.1)	-
/CrV/	1	26 (9.1)	130 (6.0)	0.33 (2.4)	18.6 (4.9)
	5	29 (9.2)	130 (6.0)	0.38 (2.4)	10.1 (6.7)
	10	26 (6.2)	127 (5.1)	1.09 (2.1)	6.6 (4.9)
	20	40 (3.6)	127 (4.4)	1.03 (1.9)	3.5 (2.4)
	50	41 (2.7)	126 (4.0)	1.14 (1.9)	0.4 (0.3)
	emp	61 (26.9)	120 (9.6)	2.30 (3.8)	

The result is a bifurcation in the learning chain. Figure 8 shows the evolution of the mean and variance over 50 generations for a representative simulation where 20% of /kru:/ tokens were devoiced/fricated by a random percentage in each training sample at each iteration. For the first few generations there is little qualitative change in the mixtures learned, but at generation 9, the number of dimensions used for classification changes from 4 to 3, and as a result the category labels assigned by the learner are significantly different than those intended by the teacher. This coincides with a spike in the classification error rate (see Figure 12). The marginal mixture distribution estimates learned by the following generation further serve to find separations in this multidimensional cue space due to the objective function being optimized by the decision rule. The result is that F_0 drops for the /kru:/ category, while H1*-H2* rises slightly and an intermediate VOT category emerges. After 50 generations or so the simulation tends to stabilize, as seen in Figure 8 and assessed by non-significant ($p > 0.3$) results of Hotelling’s T^2 tests comparing distributions at adjacent timepoints.

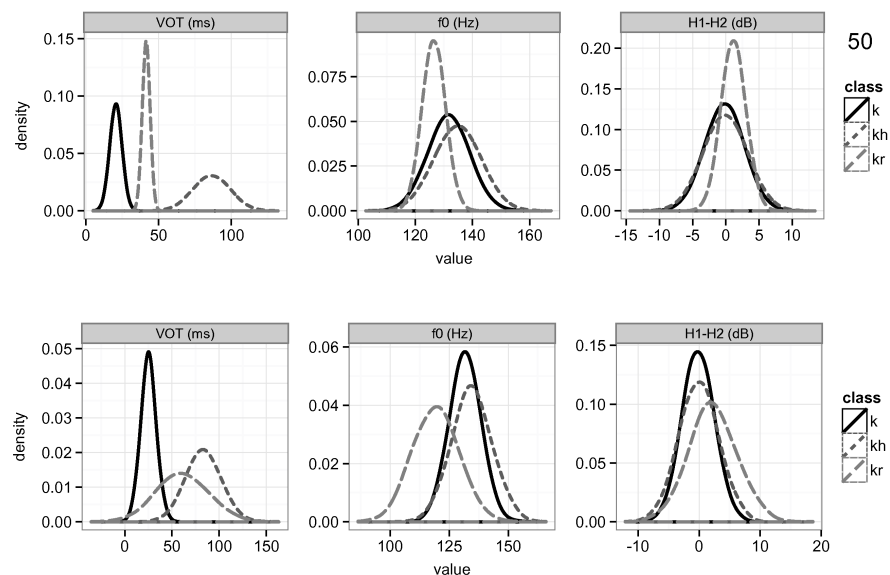


Figure 9: Top row: density estimates for 3 cues in a population that misattributes ρ proportion of /r/s as increased VOT after 50 generations (duration of /r/ = 0). Classification error rate at generation 50: 0.002. Bottom row: empirical cue distributions for colloquial pronunciations of /ku:/, /kʰu:/, and /kru:/ forms (after Kirby under review). Classification error rate: 0.006.

These results can be compared with the empirical distributions taken from the colloquial production data of Kirby (under review), given in Figure 9 and Table 4. These indicate good qualitative, if not quantitative fits; the ideal observer seeks to maximize differences in category structure, whereas the empirical data display a greater range of variance, especially in terms of the VOT distribution for /CrV/ forms. As noted above, the ideal observer estimates represent optimal, rather than actual, performance; it is therefore encouraging that the effect is broadly compatible with the empirical findings. Greater approximation to the empirical distributions might be obtained by degrading the input or learning procedure in some principled manner (Section 2.1.2).

3.3 Series III: Compensation for coarticulation

In the simulations described above, it was assumed that the devoiced/fricated proportion ρ of /r/ was misparsed by learners as increased VOT. That is, the assumption is that learners failed to compensate for what is in some sense an effect of coarticulation. It is instructive to consider the outcome if we do not make this assumption. This is broadly in the spirit of Labov's (1994: 586) suggestion that 'misunderstood tokens may never form part of the pool of tokens that are used to establish probabilities' (see also Kroch, 1989; Garrett and Johnson, 2013), or what is sometimes referred to as 'input filtering'. In this set of

simulations, the duration of 20% of all tokens of /r/ were reduced by a random proportion ρ as in Series II, but now this was not added to the VOT of those same training examples. The same 2-standard-deviation cutoff was employed to determine when a dimension would cease to be considered by the learner.

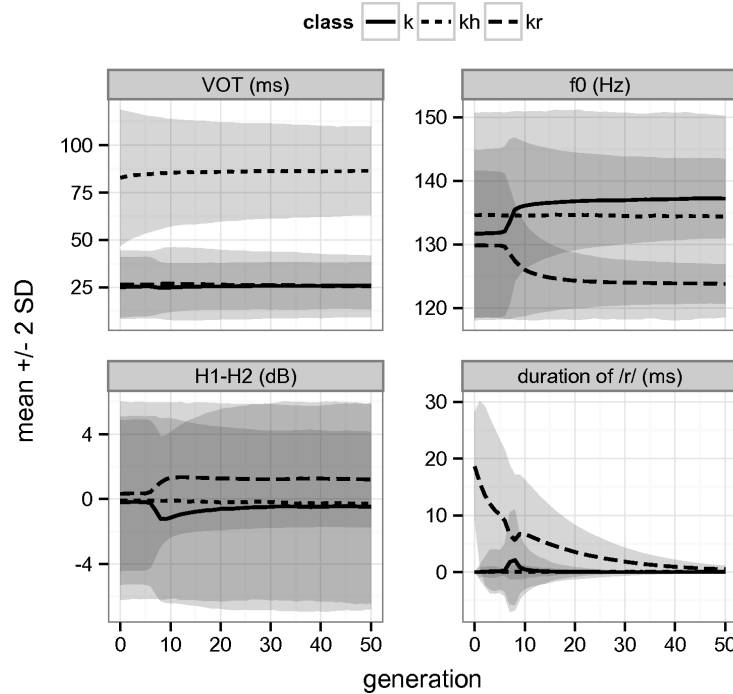


Figure 10: Evolution of means and variance of cues to category distributions after 50 generations in a population that does not misparse devoiced/fricated portions of /r/ as onset VOT (see also Table 5). Lines indicate category means; shading shows two standard deviations around the mean. Note the abrupt changes in variance at generation 9, especially for the duration of /r/, which is the point in this simulation run at which this dimension becomes ignored by the learner.

The result is again a bifurcation in the learning chain, but with a qualitatively different outcome. Figure 10 shows the evolution of the mean and variance over 50 generations for a representative simulation under this regime. For the first few generations there is little qualitative change in the mixtures learned, but by generation 10, the number of dimensions used for classification changes from 4 to 3, again coinciding with a spike in the classification error rate (Figure 12), as the category labels assigned by the learner are significantly different than those intended by the teacher. However, because the production of VOT is not being actively modified in any way by the phonetic bias, the separation in cue values occurs exclusively in the F_0 and H1*–H2* cues. While there is also a brief initial separation in mean H1*–H2*

between /k^hu:/ and /kru:/, this becomes lost by around 40 generations, with F_0 and H1*-H2* serving only to distinguish /kru:/-class from /ku:/-class forms.

Table 5: Evolution of means and standard deviations of F_0 , VOT, H1*-H2*, and duration of /r/ at $t = 1, 5, 10, 20$, and 50 generations in a population that misparses ρ proportion of 20% of /r/s as increased VOT. ‘emp’ = empirical results from Kirby (under review).

	t	VOT (ms)	F_0 (Hz)	H1*-H2* (dB)	duration of /r/ (ms)
/CV/	1	25 (8.1)	131 (6.9)	-0.19 (2.6)	-
	5	25 (8.0)	132 (6.9)	-0.18 (2.6)	-
	10	25 (6.5)	136 (5.1)	-1.15 (2.7)	-
	20	26 (6.3)	137 (4.5)	-0.60 (3.1)	-
	50	26 (6.3)	137 (3.2)	-0.47 (3.2)	-
	emp	28 (11.3)	106 (1.3)	-8.3 (7.5)	-
/C ^h V/	1	83 (18.3)	135 (8.2)	-0.10 (3.1)	-
	5	85 (15.8)	135 (8.3)	-0.08 (3.1)	-
	10	85 (14.5)	134 (8.2)	-0.09 (3.1)	-
	20	86 (13.3)	134 (8.3)	-0.21 (3.2)	-
	50	86 (11.9)	134 (8.1)	-0.25 (3.2)	-
	emp	66 (9.9)	110 (3.5)	-6.50 (6.2)	-
/CrV/	1	26 (9.1)	130 (6.0)	0.32 (2.4)	15.3 (4.9)
	5	26 (9.0)	130 (5.9)	0.35 (2.4)	9.9 (7.5)
	10	27 (9.8)	126 (3.7)	1.31 (1.9)	6.5 (5.5)
	20	26 (9.3)	126 (2.2)	1.27 (1.6)	3.7 (3.1)
	50	26 (8.3)	124 (1.6)	1.21 (1.5)	0.2 (0.3)
	emp	25 (10.3)	96 (5.2)	-5.8 (7.2)	-

It is interesting to consider the predictions of this model in light of the empirical facts of a different Khmer dialect, that spoken in Kiên Giang (KG) province in neighboring Vietnam. Thạch Ngọc Minh (1999) reports a development of a falling F_0 contour following loss of /r/, but does not transcribe any subsequent increase in aspiration, giving examples such as Standard Khmer /kra:/ ~ KG Khmer [krà:] ‘poor’ (otherwise homophonous with /ka:/ ‘neck’), Standard Khmer /cra:n/ ~ KG Khmer [cà:n] ‘to push’ (otherwise homophonous with /ca:n/ ‘bowl’), etc. Preliminary analysis of data from an acoustic/perceptual study of this variety confirm that while KG lexical items pronounced with trills in Standard Khmer have a lower F_0 compared to their Standard Khmer counterparts, there is no accompanying increase in VOT

(Kirby, 2013b). This can be seen from Table 5 and the density plots in the bottom row of Figure 11, which show empirical cue distributions for the productions of forms with onsets /k/ /k^h/ /kr/ from a representative speaker in the study. At least in this speaker, there does not appear to be any evidence of breathy voice quality, but average F_0 is clearly much lower in /CrV/ forms. Although the data are still being analyzed, it is encouraging that the results of changing a single parameter setting in the model framework appear to correspond to empirically attested stable states. Nonetheless, it remains to be demonstrated that the productions of this speaker are representative of the population in question.

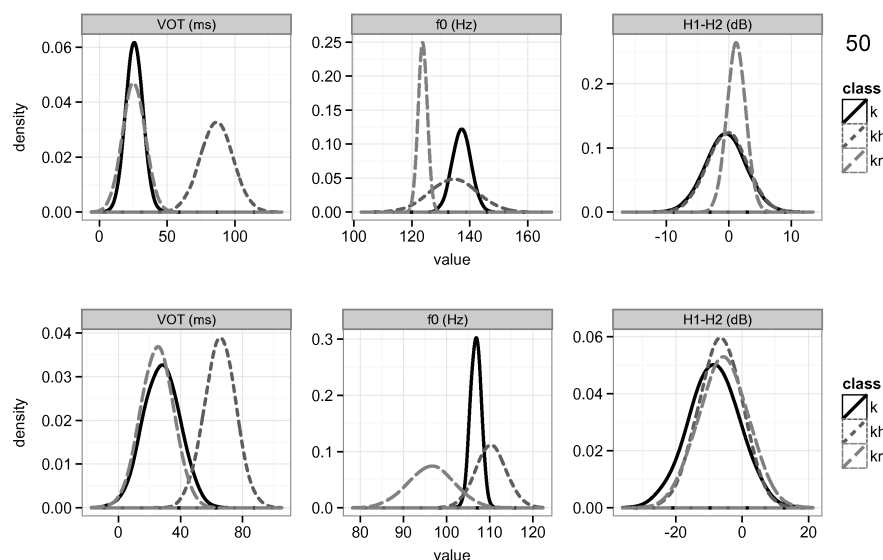


Figure 11: Top row: density estimates for cues of a population that does not misattribute devoiced /r/ to onset VOT. Classification error rate at generation 50: 0.002. Bottom row: empirical cue distributions for productions of /ku:/, /k^hu:/, and /kru:/ forms based on recordings of a representative male speaker of KG Khmer (after Kirby, 2013b). Classification error rate: 0.05.

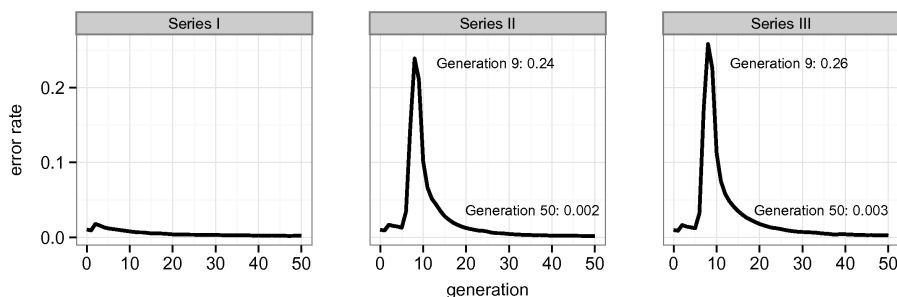


Figure 12: Evolution of error rates for each of the three simulation series. Series I: stable evolution, no bias. Series II: bias misparsed as a property of the onset. Series III: bias plus input filtering (no misparsing).

4 Discussion

The simulations reported above show how learners modeled as ideal observers in a social learning environment, given Standard Khmer cue distributions as input, will converge on a set of cue distributions that qualitatively resemble the empirical distributions observed in actual PP Khmer data. In addition, whether or not learners were assumed to misattribute the acoustic result of a phonetic bias factor was seen to have a dramatic impact on the evolution of the phonetic category structures.

Given a reasonably accurate characterization of a synchronic start state and a hypothesized phonetic bias factor, this type of model enables predictions about directionality in phonologization from a point in time when the ‘seeds’ of the change still lie below the threshold of perceptibility. In the Khmer case examined here, it may be that the pre-existing bias towards slightly lowered F_0 and slightly higher $H1^*-H2^*$ in /CrV/ forms became ‘amplified’ or enhanced when the contrast became endangered. Of course, things need not have turned out this way, and the precise outcome illustrated here is in some ways dependent on other assumptions about the makeup of the population, the rate of fortition, and the threshold at which attention to cue will shift. Nonetheless, the finding that under relatively realistic assumptions the model’s prediction is broadly in line with the empirical findings suggests that this is a promising approach worthy of further investigation.

4.1 Independence of phonetic dimensions

In the Introduction, I referred to an account of incipient tonogenesis in PP Khmer grounded in the tendency for /r/ to devoice or fricativize, conditioning breathy voice quality which would in turn result in a lower F_0 . In the ideal observer model, however, all cue dimensions are treated as independent. While not wholly unmotivated (Clayards, 2008), such independence assumptions are almost certainly not warranted in every case: that is, there are some cues which are not independent for physiological reasons, such as breathy voice quality and lowered F_0 (which share the articulatory setting of reduced vocal fold tension). One way to capture such dependencies would be to relax the independence assumption of the naive Bayes classifier used here. Completely removing this assumption entails estimating the entire covariance matrix, which can be problematic in multivariate settings. One potential compromise would be the use of a BAYESIAN BELIEF NETWORK (Pearl, 1988), a probabilistic model where conditional dependencies are represented by edges in a directed acyclic graph. Due in part to the existence of efficient

learning and inference algorithms for Bayes nets, they have become increasingly popular in automatic speech recognition applications (Zweig, 1998; Livescu et al., 2003; King et al., 2007), where they provide an attractive and tractable way to capture all and only the relevant dependencies between cue dimensions.

4.2 Compensation for coarticulation and population diversity

The implementation of the phonetic precursor discussed here is closely related to the proposal of Beddor (2009), who shows how a gesture initially associated with one segment can come to be interpreted distinctively with a different segment. Beddor's study focuses on the emergence of contrastive nasalization, whereby the acoustic effects of velum lowering initially associated with a nasal come to be associated with a following vowel, but it is conceptually very similar to the temporal exchange between duration of /r/ and onset VOT hypothesized here. It would be interesting to see if Khmer listeners are sensitive to experimental manipulations of this covariation in the same way that participants in Beddor's study were sensitive to covariation in the duration of nasals and the degree of anticipatory vowel nasalization.

In the third set of simulations discussed above, however, the assumption was made that listeners were disregarding coarticulatory effects when they resulted from the application of a phonetic production bias. This too is a commonly held assumption: Garrett and Johnson (2013) for example state that "[i]t seems reasonable to assume that variants produced by phonetic bias factors are usually 'corrected', either by perceptual processes like compensation or by rejection of speech errors" (73). The degree to which this type of correction might be applied presumably needs to be related to the strength of the bias factor in some fashion, given that perceptual learning is known to generalize across speakers (Kraljic and Samuel, 2006) and that variation in cognitive processing styles can give rise to differential rates of compensation for coarticulation in a neurotypical population (Yu, 2010). Moreover, the findings of Labov, Sankoff, Harrington, and others indicate that the phonetic realization of phonological categories can and does change over the lifespan, and that social factors (such as the desire to distinguish oneself or one's group identity via linguistic means) are sure to play an important role. Future extensions of this framework should therefore explore the space of outcomes under a more varied and realistic set of assumptions about the incidence and causes of compensation for coarticulation in the population.

4.3 Actuation and stability

The role of population diversity is also important for the issue of actuation in sound change, an issue not directly addressed in the present simulations. Although stability is predicted when no bias factor is present, the introduction of a bias factor begins an inevitable progression towards a qualitative change in the distributions learned. As noted repeatedly at least since Weinrich et al. (1968), this is problematic

given that the general state of sound systems appears to be one of stability rather than constant change, even (or especially) in the presence of bias. Baker (2008a) goes so far to assert that ‘phonologization-of-coarticulation’ models are completely empirically inadequate (32) because they predict sound change to occur “whenever possible, in every language, and at every time” (31).

However, there are reasons to think it may be premature to reject this mechanism of change entirely. Besides studies that do appear to show incremental change across the lifespan, other mechanisms may impact the likelihood of phonologization of phonetic variability. In addition to mechanisms that warp the perceptual space prior to categorization (Iverson and Kuhl, 1995), learners may be biased towards existing or smaller numbers of categories (Pothos and Close, 2008; Pothos and Bailey, 2009), which may inhibit the phonologization of intermediate variants; aspects of population diversity and dynamics reviewed above surely play a central role as well (Baker et al., 2011; Kirby and Sonderegger, 2013).

4.4 Relation to other models

The model sketched above employs a relatively simple characterization of the relationship between teachers and learners, whereby each learner receives independent and identically distributed random samples from its teachers and uses these to compute maximum likelihood estimates by making strong assumptions about the form of the distributions. Different approaches are of course possible. If the distributional assumptions were relaxed, one might instead simulate draws from the posterior distribution using some type of Monte Carlo sampling technique (rejection sampling, Gibbs sampling, etc.). The implementation of such techniques for multivariate mixtures with possibly differing covariance matrices is challenging, however, and in this instance it is not immediately clear how the added complexity of such a model would shed greater light on the issues of interest here. Despite differences in the basic assumptions about the source of data, results from the iterated learning literature are likely to be relevant here (Griffiths and Kalish, 2007; S. Kirby et al. 2007; Burkett and Griffiths, 2010).

The learning method sketched here is also related to several other previously proposed models of phonological change. While space precludes a detailed comparison, several observations are worth noting. A number of authors have considered sound change from within the general framework of exemplar models (Johnson, 1997; Kirchner, 1998; Pierrehumbert, 2001; Wedel, 2006), which have close analogs to statistical methods of probability density estimation of the kind employed in the present work (Estes, 1986; Ashby and Maddox, 1993; Rosseel, 2002). In particular, many models of classification can be shown to be equivalent to an inductive process by which the observer estimates the likelihood that a novel stimulus x belongs to one of K categories (Ashby and Alfonso-Reese, 1995). The difference between ‘true’ exemplar models and density estimation models of the type described here is less important than the

distinction between whether the classifiers are assumed to be parametric or nonparametric - that is, whether or not the distribution of the observed data is assumed to have been generated by a distribution easily described by just a few parameters, such as the mean and variance.

While some research (most of it involving the classification of visual stimuli) argues in favor of nonparametric models of human categorization behavior, there are other empirical domains (such as speech) where the relevant distributions *do* appear to follow well-known parameterized distributions. In addition, nonparametric approaches predict that, given enough training experience, human classification behavior should eventually come to resemble that of the underlying category structure, no matter how arbitrary. This is probably not the case, since human classification behavior clearly *is* limited, or at least preferentially constrained. For instance, McKinley and Nosofsky (1995) conducted an experiment in which they had participants categorize visual stimuli for which the optimal likelihood classification boundary was both highly nonquadratic and not possible to characterize as a simple continuous curve. Even with continuous corrective feedback, only one-third of the participants in this experiment were able to exceed the classification accuracy of a quadratic (parametric) classifier, and another third were unable to even perform as well as a simple linear classifier. In their computational work on English and Japanese vowel category learning, Vallabha et al. (2007) compared parametric and nonparametric versions of an online mixture estimation algorithm. They found the parametric algorithm significantly outperformed the nonparametric one, which they attributed to the nonparametric estimator's inherent lack of constraints on the underlying category structure.

These types of results suggest that nonparametric density estimators may be too powerful a model of human classification behavior. This is especially true in the case of speech sounds, where most evidence suggests that variability in the speech signal is accessible to and used by speakers and listeners in forming category judgments (Pisoni and Tash, 1974; Miller and Volaitis, 1989; McMurray et al., 2002; Clayards et al., 2008). As the notion of category is ill-defined in exemplar-based approaches – the categories are, in a very real sense, defined by the experienced tokens themselves – it is not clear how variability in the signal should become information for the listener in such a model.

Another approach to phonological category learning and change from a non-exemplar perspective is Boersma and Hamann (2008), who consider the evolution of phonological categories in a constraint-based framework. In order to avoid computing auditory distances, their model discretizes the continuous auditory cue space into an arbitrary number of cue constraints, which are then ranked using a standard constraint-demotion algorithm. However, this approach requires that the cue constraints be ranked relative to a universal 'ease of articulation' curve, a concept that has proven particularly difficult to rigorously quantify (Poupplier, 2003). In addition, since the authors' primary focus was on accounting for auditory dispersion, they do not explore the question of how multiple phonetic cues would interact in their model.

In spite of the difference between these models, superficial and otherwise, it is important to point out that their basic predictions are all consistent with the idea that changes to phonological systems may be emergent, rather than explicitly goal-oriented. The main contribution of the present formulation is provide an explicit characterization of categorization in the multivariate case, and to show how changes in attention to one phonetic cue can have abrupt and substantive impact on the realization of others.

4.4.1 Lexical competition effects

In the simulations reported above, the number of category labels K is assumed to be fixed and unchanging. Looking at the degree to which some of the cue distributions overlap, however, one might wonder why transphonologization, and not category merger, should be the outcome in this case. One reason might involve some type of systemic pressure for lexical distinctiveness. Blevins and Wedel (2009) propose a model in which VARIANT TRADING promotes separation between competing adjacent categories. The degree to which variant trading plays a role is mediated by the disambiguating influence of both word-external factors, such as discourse context, as well as word-internal factors, such as distributional overlap in phonetic cues. In fact, in this model, *any* factor that reduces categorization error promotes greater contrast between categories over time.

For Blevins and Wedel, variant trading provides a principled, non-teleological mechanism for explaining the avoidance of sound change in just those cases where it would create ‘pernicious’ homophony, such as in inflectional paradigms. As Khmer is not an inflecting language, it is not obvious that ambiguity in word-internal dimensions should outstrip the disambiguating effects of the relevant word-external factors: ‘father’ and ‘kind of fish’ seem unlikely to be confused, even if pronounced identically. Furthermore, while variant trading should promote the distinctiveness of existing covert contrasts, it is not clear how it would drive the emergence of an intermediate VOT category. Nevertheless, this approach suggests a promising avenue for additional modeling work.

4.4.2 A role for probabilistic enhancement?

In Kirby (2010, 2013a) I outlined a similar computational model of sound change, arguing that bias-induced loss of contrast precision alone is not enough to induce transphonologization; at least in some cases, (probabilistic) enhancement of subphonemic cues also appears to be necessary. I proposed that degree of enhancement is a probabilistic function of contrast precision, while the probability with which a given cue is enhanced is related directly to its informativeness or reliability – the degree to which it contributes to accurate identification of a speech sound. This approach was successfully used to model the emergence of contrastive F_0 in Seoul Korean (Kirby, 2010, 2013a), and the incipient tonogenesis in PP

Khmer looks on the surface to be a similar scenario: a phonetic bias factor (here, fortition of /r/) affects a loss of precision (here, between /CrV/ and /CV/ or /C^hV/ forms). This loss of precision would then be predicted to drive probabilistic enhancement of other available cues, such as the degree of F_0 drop or breathy phonation. Thus, it is perhaps surprising that a qualitative approximation of the empirical results obtains in the Khmer case without this mechanism. Indeed, when the procedure outlined above was augmented with a probabilistic enhancement mechanism, the results were more or less identical.

Why should this be the case? There are several differences between the two procedures that may play a role, but the most important is probably that the two approaches model the acquisition and classification of categories in fundamentally different ways. First, Kirby (2010, 2013a) simulates an ‘online’ learning scenario in which two adult speakers exchange speech tokens one at a time. In the face of bias, the probabilistic enhancement strategy works to rein in this bias, promoting stability of the status quo. In the present work, learners operate in ‘batch mode’, performing classification and density estimation simultaneously with access to the sum total of experienced tokens. The second major difference is the introduction here of the potential for a shift in the number of cue dimensions used to perform categorization. It is interesting to note that changing the number of dimensions has much the same effect as probabilistic enhancement, but without having to track incremental changes in cue distributions within a single learner. The present model therefore predicts (near-)categorical discontinuities between generations, as has often been empirically observed. While this does not mean that listener-oriented enhancement plays no role whatsoever in sound change (cf. Lindblom, 1990; Lindblom et al., 1995; Diehl, 2008), it does suggest that its impact on the process of cross-generational change may be constrained or obscured relative to the role played by categorization behavior and attention to cue.

5 Conclusions

This paper has described a computational modeling framework that can shed light on the dynamics of transphonologization. We have examined the case of incipient tonogenesis in Phnom Penh Khmer and seen how, by making minimal assumptions about learners, transphonologization results from the application of phonetic production bias in a population of ideal observer agents. In particular, abrupt changes in the distribution of acoustic cues to category membership coincided with changes in attention to cue. These results are consistent with the sudden and discontinuous nature of many sound changes, and suggest that what appear to be enhancement effects may also emerge from different assumptions about the number of cue dimensions accessible to or deemed relevant by the learner.

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